DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 675 CG 023 649

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TITLE I Feel Like an Armadillo: A Look at College Seniors and Recent Graduates Using Erik Erikson's Model of "Identity Versus Role-Diffusion."
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - General (140) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Graduates; College Seniors; Higher Education; *Individual Development; Trend Analysis; *Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS *Identity Formation

ABSTRACT

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson observed that achieving a sense of self, an identity, was the important psychosocial task facing adolescents. The conflict lies in discovering and defining that identity despite parental and societal demands, changing values and opportunities, the influence of friends, and lovers, education, and finances. Although Erickson deemed "identity versus role-diffusion" to be the last stage of adolescence, this paper argues that achieving identity is a process that actually continues through early adulthood. The extended phase is seen especially in college seniors and graduates who have spent at least 4 years in a university, a place which one professor has likened to Disneyland, describing it as "an environment for pleasure through learning and knowledge." It has been found that among final year students, the prospect of going out into the world and getting a "real job" causes mixed emotions. Accounting for this are internal factors, such as a lack of commitment about plans or values, and external factors, such as a bleak job market and parental pressures to earn an independent living. Media attention has heightened regarding the development of young adults, with the likely purpose of defining them as constituents and consumers. Family therapists and career counselors can tell seniors and graduates to deal with reality, allow for change, and do something. If this generation views family life and free time as of equal importance with career demands, then a resolution of the "identity crisis" may moves young adults on to Erikson's next stage of psychosocial development of "intimacy versus isolation." (Quotations from newspapers, magazines, books, and individual young adults are included.) (ABL)

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I FEEL LIKE AN ARMADILLO:

A Look at College Seniors and Recent Graduates Using Erik Erikson's Model of "Identity Versus Role-Diffusion"

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SUMMER 1991

CG023649

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ABSTRACT

Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1959) observed that achieving a sense of self, an "identity," was the important psychosocial task facing adolescents..The conflict? Discovering and defining that identity despite various factors - parental and societal demands, changing values and opportunities, the influence of friends and lovers, education, finances.

Although Erikson deemed "identity versus role-diffusion" as the last stage of adolescence, this paper addresses the notion that achieving identity is a process that actually continues through early adulthood, about the ages of 21-28. The extended phase is seen especially in college seniors and graduates who have spent at least four years in a place that my former biology professor once announced is "like Disneyland! A university is just an environment for pleasure through learning and knowledge."

This paper deals with external and internal factors contributing to the task of achieving identity as well as possible counseling approaches during this developmental phase. Then these particular college seniors and graduates are placed in the context of the media's recent focus on the "baby busters" in their "twentysomething" years. Finally, the implications of this particular generation's impact on the workplace and family through the next decade are presented.

"It is successful work experience that helps a young person resolve the conflicts of dependency and establish an independent identity," writes Gail Sheehy in her developmental study, PASSAGES [Bantam Books, 1974].

However, during interviews conducted with 30 or so college seniors and recent graduates in San Diego, California in the spring of 1991, I found that most dreaded, even avoided, the prospects of "a real job." I wondered how this attitude affects their identity formation.

What else do college seniors feel as they await graduation? Indifference, excitement, doubt, panic, impatience, ennui, confusion.

"I feel like an armadillo in the middle of a road with headlights coming at him in the dead of night," says Andrew, a biochemistry major who graduates from the University of California-San Diego (UCSD) in June.

"What does an armadillo do then?" I ask.

"He freezes."

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Why the mixed emotions among college seniors?

Consider <u>external factors</u>, such as this year's bleak job market and parental pressures to earn an independent living.

"Companies are expected to hire 10% fewer graduates than last year, according to an annual survey conducted by the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University. That fall-off follows a 13.3% cutback in hiring last year" [Los Angeles Times, 11 April 1991].

In terms of supply and demand, those figures refer to an average of 870,000 college graduates who enter the work force every year. The Bureau of Labor estimated a total of 21 million from 1982-1995.

Although a decrease occurred after 1986 (reflecting declining births during the last two decades), the number of college graduates entering the work force through the year 2000 is still projected to exceed the number of job openings requiring a college education by about 100,000 annually.

"I'm so stressed!" says Amanda, a UCSD senior studying communications, two months away from graduation. "My older sister is an engineer who started applying for jobs six months before graduation! So my parents are really pressuring me now, but I don't even know what I want to do. How can I get out there and start looking?"

Jeff, a college textbook editor, has two sons who recently graduated from the University of Michigan. He observes, "Parents think that what their children choose to do is a direct reflection somehow on them. They think they are being judged by their child's behavior. And they feel that they have a responsibility to make that person into

something they wish that person should be. As parents, I don't think we have a right to do that."

However, beyond external factors of economic statistics and parental demands, crucial internal factors also affect these seniors. They go through what developmental psychologist Erik Erikson labeled the psychosocial stage of "identity versus role-diffusion." Although Erikson's original model applies to adolescents, characteristics of this stage are found in college seniors and recent graduates who range from ages 21-28.

"My undergraduate career was a hobby!" says Scott, a 1988 University of California-Santa Barbara graduate in psychology. "College was just a big party!" recalls Alan, who graduated from Southern Methodist University in 1989 with a marketing degree.

After four (or even five or six) such years in college, no wonder seniors have put their achievement of an identity on hold. When they realize that their degrees are not E-tickets to "the real world," frustration and fear take hold.

Seniors may disavow their university education altogether. "I want to do special programming, like for sports events or music festivals," says Chris, a 22-year old UCSD senior majoring in literature, "but I have no idea how. Sometimes I think that if I got into that field right after high school, I'd be a lot farther along by now."

Alexa, another 22-year old at UCSD, asks, "What will I do with a sociology major? My mom says that majoring in sociology is for students with rich parents."

Even if they do not face prolonged unemployment, many graduates will definitely experience "underemployment," working at jobs that do not require a college degree. So this developmental stage lasts long after "Pomp and Circumstances."

The present recession accounts for the dreary employment outlook for college seniors, but another contributing factor is the significant number of older people who remain on the job. Yes, the "baby boomers" are about 76 million strong, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

The phrase "baby busters" was coined last year by demographics experts, who noted that although entry-level openings are available to recent college graduates, they face undue competition from "baby boomers" for higher positions.

CRISIS VERSUS COMMITMENT

According to Erikson, the two variables affecting the achievement of identity are "crisis" and "commitment." A crisis occurs when an individual confronts aspects of his or her personal identity, such as deciding to move back with parents after graduation. A commitment is reached when the choices are made and a plan of action is followed through -

for instance, a graduate who decides to work in publishing takes an entry-level position as an editorial assistant.

Social researcher James Marcia (1980) divided Erikson's model into the following categories:

- "Identity diffusion" (Feeling noncommittal about plans or values)

"I don't care what I do," says Jennifer, a UCSD senior majoring in communications, "as long as I'm happy. I don't care about making money. I could work at a gift shop or a flower stand this summer!"

- "Identity foreclosure" (Getting into situations that seem secure and directed, but without personal motivation or reflection)

"I'm not worried about graduating," says Garrett, a 23-year old UCSD electrical engineering major, who was already offered an annual salary of $28,000 from General Dynamics. Garrett's father and older brother are engineers in the US Air Force. "I guess I'm one of those majors that knows we'll have a job out there, no matter what."

- "Identity moratorium" (Experiencing strong reactions and questions, which delay definite choices)

"I want to deal blackjack in Tahoe and play guitar in a jazz band!" David, a 22-year old UCSD senior majoring in economics, says ofhis post-graduation plans. "I'll never have the chance to go off and do things like that again."

- "Identity achievement" (Resolving crisis and making commitments by setting realistic goals)

"I want to be a literature professor, specializing in humor and feminism!" states Ann, who graduated from San Diego State University last December. "Now how many scholars are studying that combination? I really want to get into the program at Stanford, but I won't know if I get accepted until May. In the meantime, I start classes at San Francisco State. Then I can get used to living on my own up there."

What will most seniors do when June comes around?

IBM, Hewlitt-Packard and Arthur Anderson may not be recruiting, but sales positions at Nordstrom are always available. A 1990 Berkeley graduate in linguistics now drives a United Postal Service truck for $30,000 a year. Musicians, who majored in everything from anthropology to physics, will play rock'n'roll in bars on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood, taking "day jobs" in trendy restaurants and car dealer shops. Some will attend graduate school to study ethnographic film, art history or entertainment law. Others will take off to teach English to Thai businessmen or plant flowers in an Israeli kibbutz.

Ken Dychtwald, a California psychologist, offered his own version of how young adults fare during this stage of development [Los Angeles Times, 17 June 1990]:

- A small group that succeeds no matter what, and proves Social Darwinism's survival-of-the-fittest theory. ("Identity achievement")

- A large group that settles for a lesser version of the American Dream, telling themselves such things as "I may not be able to buy a BMW, but a Chevy Blazer's just fine." These people will emphasize recreation and self-satisfaction rather than career achievement. ("Identity foreclosure")
- A significantly large underclass of disenfranchised, disillusioned busters. ("Identity moratorium/Identity diffusion")

TWENTYSOMETHING

Media attention has heightened regarding the development of young adults, with the likely purpose of defining them as constituents and consumers.

Articles and books do describe an overall sense of the transitional phase that Sheehy termed "the Trying Twenties" in PASSAGES: "Today a quarter of a century is often spent before an individual is expected or expects himself to fix his life's course. Given the permissiveness to experiment, the prolonged schooling available, and the moratoria allowed, it is not unusual...to be nearly 30 before firmly setting a course."

In the newly published GENERATIONS: THE HISTORY OF AMERICA'S FUTURE 1584-2069 [William Morrow, 1991], political analysts William Strauss and Neil Howe identified "the reactive generation" of Americans who fall between the ages of 10-30.

Said Howe, "We call [them] 13ers because they are the 13th generation in American history and because the number 13 reflects their hard luck."

Howe added that "because 13ers are coming of age at a more sobering time than the boomers, they feel as if they've come upon a beach trashed from a summer of partying. And they get fined for littering" [Los Angeles Times, 4 April 1991].

Syndicated humor columnist Roger Simon noted in a column titled "Words to the Class of '90" [Los Angeles Times, 10 June 1990]: "These last 22 years have been a free ride for most of you. You've gotten free food, free rent and free clothing. Now it is time to pay up. And pay up you will. Your first big problem is that you were born one generation too late."

A Time cover last July announced "Twentysomething - Laid back, late blooming or just lost?" Two weeks later, Fortune featured a cover story titled "What 25 Year Olds Want." Even USA Today portrayed "the boomerang generation" that cannot be neatly defined in terms of musical preferences, fashion styles, career goals, family values or political views. Of course, this "boomerang generation" confuses politicians and advertisers alike because no common platform or target exists.

THE PURPLE FUNK

Why should counselors be aware of the troubles of this generation?

Beyond the usual stress caused by everything from job interviews or adjusting to a 9-5 schedule to moving back with parents or finding dates, serious emotional problems arise during this stage of development.

Researchers studying the rise of depression in the United States over the past 30 years noted that the disorder is now epidemic among young adults, especially in their early 20's. According to recent studies by the National Institute of Mental Health, "the causes could by psychosocial - resulting from historical, cultural or economic changes" [Los Angeles Times, 9 October 1988].

Commented Dr. Gerald Klerman, professor of psychiatry at Cornell University Medical Center, "There's a gap between expectations and fulfillment. And women are particularly vulnerable" [Los Angeles Times, 9 October 1988].

Other data concurs on the same frequency of depression, especially among young women who must cope with the stress of making decisions about marriage as well as career. "Self-destructive tactics (too much alcohol, drug use, work or sex) are not uncommon among women who are experiencing a particularly difficult mid-twenties passage" [Mademoiselle, September 1989].

For young women who do effectively negotiate these changes, the feminist credo of "having it all" does not seem

to hold true. "A 1990 Yankelovich Clancy Shulman poll found that 43% of women ages 21-29 would give up work indefinitely if they could afford the income loss" [Los Angeles Times, 12 June 1991].

And young men face similar difficulties in defining their identities. Andy, a 1989 Berkeley graduate who majored in economics, calls his recurring mood "the purple funk." Andy has moved four times and worked for three social service agencies in San Diego and San Francisco. Changes scare him - like breaking up with his girlfriend of four years, contemplating graduate school, losing touch with friends and family.

However, Andy believes that the confusion that he feels now will enable him to avert the midlife crisis that his father is presently going through. "For me, it's understanding your impulses and doing what you feel, not going with the main flow and trying to be acceptable to everybody else," Andy reflects.

"My dad is trying to understand himself. He's always been a dentist. All his life, he thought he was comfortable with himself, but he realizes another side of himself that he's never explored. That's where I'm at the advantage. I'm not starting over. I'm just starting."

REALITY AND RESOLUTIONS

What can career counselors and family therapists tell these seniors and graduates? Deal with reality. Allow for change. And do something.

Observes Paul Saltman, a UCSD biology professor, "If you want to go for money, there are certain ways that you go. If you want to go out of love, there are other ways you go. There are a million opportunities to be a useful and productive citizen in the world - everyone of them is enhanced by having knowledge and self-discipline and commitment."

Saltman continues, "It's not just muddling! You have to commit to do something and do it the best you can. You don't just sit there and say - 'The world owes me a job that I will be happy doing and pays me a lot of money.' There's an important struggle out there. I think that should be understood."

David Cannon, a career counselor at Queen's University in Canada, calls today's college seniors "Generation X." By studying "focus groups" at various campuses, he found that seniors share the following traits: craving for stimulation; need for personal contact; preference for concrete, specific information; desire to learn leading-edge technology; search for traditional goals; looking for "good-looking" jobs; emotional repression; keeping options open [Journal of Career Planning and Employment, Winter 1991].

In order to assist these seniors and graduates, counselors and employers must redefine their purposes.

Members of "Generation X" don't want to research the employment scene. They want practical handouts - lists of MBA schools, directories of music companies, addresses of foreign teaching programs in Europe. They want to learn details about entry-level positions - "the kind of projects they would be involved in; on the ways people move around in the organization; on the chances of working internationally or on returing to school; on the leave options for the family; on the job's geographic location; and of course, on the money."

"Make work more like school," Cannon advises employers. Break down projects into small tasks that feel like assignments. Implement formal workshops and regular evaluations during orientation sessions. Citibank and Arthur Anderson presently operate such corporate training institutes.

Cannon views that most "Generation X" members are not ready for work. Why? "Decisions mean commitments, and that makes Xs very nervous because commitments limit options. If you go to work for AT&T, that means you can't work for Digital...or at least, not at the same time. Similarly, if you choose to live in New York, that eliminates Denver for the time being. Irrational? Indeed; but very human. Very X."

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORKPLACE AND FAMILY

The issue of when and how these students achieve their identities is problematic, since they will someday assume roles in politics and business and education.

In THE POSTPONED GENERATION [William Morrow, 1986], Susan Littwin writes, "If I were to give advice to the parents of young adults, it would be simply to let go, to accept that adulthood happens a decade later. The very nature of becoming an adult is such that no one can do it for you." However, she advises parents to consider these two "bail-outs" for their young adult children - therapy and health insurance.

Littwin adds a positive factor about these young adults. "They deal with uncertainty and ambivalence better...because they have had more practice. They have a greater capacity to enjoy life, again because they have had so much practice. As a generation, they may have more talent for recreation than any in history. And this is not meant unkindly."

If this generation is truly interested in free time over free markets and babies over bonds, then maybe future CEOs will institute family leaves, improved health care programs and extended education in their companies.

THE BEST JOBS IN AMERICA FOR PARENTS [Macmillan, 1991] acknowledges, "the next generation is forcing American companies to rewrite the rules governing everything from relocation to workplace flexibility."

This same book gives the following example from a human resources manager who recruits recent graduates: "We have people coming right out of school and one of the first things they say is, 'I don't want to be working a 50-60 hour week. I want to find that balance in my life. I have interests outside of work. I may be getting married. I may or may not be having children that I want to spend time with.' They're willing to talk about trade-offs pretty early on in their careers."

By successfully negotiating this phase of transition sometimes referred to as "early midlife crisis," then maybe these college graduates will be all the better for having withstood the pressures of achieving identity early in life.

As GENERATIONS by Strauss and Howe notes, "their alienation will continue as they become nomads driven by necessity in a world whose economic harshness is not their fault. The good news for this group is that their financial woes and cultural alienation are expected to help them seek stability in intimate relationships and restrengthen family life" [Los Angeles Times, 4 April 1991].

If these views hold true, then a resolution of the "identity crisis" moves young adults on to Erikson's next stage of psychosocial development of "intimacy versus isolation."

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